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# the *Diners'*

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# Businessman

*The Short Short 1 by Steve O'Connell*

I found that the one-pound can of shortening didn't have the price stamped on it. "Just a second," I told the customer. "I'll have to look that up."

I leafed through the price lists until I found it. "That will be 36 cents," I said. I rang up all the items on the cash register and got the total. "Four dollars and 83 cents," I said. I changed the five-dollar bill and put the groceries in a paper bag.

"Thank you," I said. "Good night and come back again."

Then, I went over to the vegetable counter to wait on the only other customer left in the store. "May I help you, sir?"

He was a small man, about 25, and he wore a jacket that was frayed at the sleeves and at the collar.

"Sure," he said. "I need help." He selected a half-dozen tomatoes. "I'll take these," he said.

I put them in a bag and weighed them. I looked at the sign in the tomato bin. "That's 19 cents a pound," I said. "Two and a half pounds makes it..." I took the pencil from behind my ear and figured. "Forty-six cents. Will there be anything else, sir?"

"Yeah," he said. "One more thing." His hand went into the slit pocket of his jacket.

The store door opened and a small boy came in carrying three empty soda water bottles.

"Take care of the kid first," the man said. "I got time."

"I'd like to turn in these bottles, mister," the boy said.

I took the three bottles from him and went to the stack of empties and looked around. I came back with one of the bottles. "I'm sorry, sonny," I said. "I can take two of these bottles, but I don't think we carry this brand."

I punched open the cash register and handed the boy 16 cents.

"And now, what else can I do for you, sir?" I asked, after the boy had gone.

His hand came halfway out of the jacket pocket and I saw that he had a gun. "You can empty the cash register, mister," he said.

I looked at him closer. Except for the fact that he needed a shave and his clothes were in bad condition, he didn't look like a holdup man.

"You must be joking," I said.

He took the gun completely out of his pocket and pointed it at me. "It works, mister," he said. "Just do like I say."

Suddenly, I realized how a man felt when he had a gun pointed at him. My heart began to pound and my lips were dry.

"Look, son," I said. "I don't know how much money is in that register, but it can't be more than 40 or 50

dollars. If you get caught, it means five years."

"I'll worry about that tomorrow."

The door of the store opened again and a young woman came in.

He shoved the gun back into his pocket. "It's still right here," he said softly, patting it. He stood to one side and appeared to be studying the lettering on the window.

"I'd like a box of cereal," the young woman said. "The large size, please."

I looked around the store and then wiped my glasses nervously.

"It's up there on the top shelf," the man said.

"Oh, yes," I said. I pulled a ladder over and brought the box down.

"That will be all," the lady said, laying the change on the counter. "Would you put that in a bag, please?"

When she left, the two of us were alone again. I was beginning to worry about the action of my heart. I'm not as young as I used to be and I can't stand too much excitement.

He turned from the window. "Paulson's Grocery Store," he said, almost to himself, as he remembered the lettering on the window. "You got a nice, busy little place here, Mr. Paulson."

The gun came out again. "The money," he said. "Remember?"

I rang up a No Sale and took the bills out of the drawer. "The change, too?" I asked.

He hesitated a moment and looked at the bills. "When you said 40 or 50, you weren't kidding." He shrugged. "Keep the small stuff."

He put the gun in his pocket and backed toward the door. "All right, Mr. Paulson," he said. "If you're as smart as you're old, you'll stay there frozen for ten minutes." He pushed his way out of the store and began running down the street.

I walked to the front of the store, looked out the window for a moment, locked the door and pulled down the shade. I waited until my heartbeat was back to normal; then I walked to the rear of the store and turned out the lights.

I headed for the small, lighted back room, took off my white jacket and laid it on the safe. I went to the small sink, let the water run until it was cold, poured myself a glass of water and took my daily dose of digitalis.

Then, I walked over to Mr. Paulson. I checked to see that he was still tied up securely and I took off his gag. "Now, Mr. Paulson," I said. "Let's be sensible about this and get down to business. I'm going to get the combination to that safe if I have to stay here with you all night." Ω